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AUTHOR	Kay, Ruth, Ed.
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ABSTRACT

Aging is a state of mind as well as body. The stereotypic image of old age is changing with the increasing variety of living patterns and lifestyles of the elderly. The physical and mental indicators of aging are also varied and do not necessarily keep pace with chronological age. The elderly face changes which challenge their physical and mental well-being. Retirement brings with it many changing roles. Changes may occur in family roles, such as becoming a grandparent, and in friendships, social networks, and community involvement. Retirement often means a change in economic status. Some retirees feel free from financial stress while others experience limited income or resources. Older adults can often take advantage of affordable senior housing and discounts offered by transportation systems, restaurants, and entertainment establishments. Older adults may also experience changing behaviors in mind and body, changes in physical health and fitness, and changes in interests and opportunities. Not all of the changes will be positive, but older adults can deal with them and with their new freedoms, experiences, rewards, and challenges if they are prepared to meet them. (NB)

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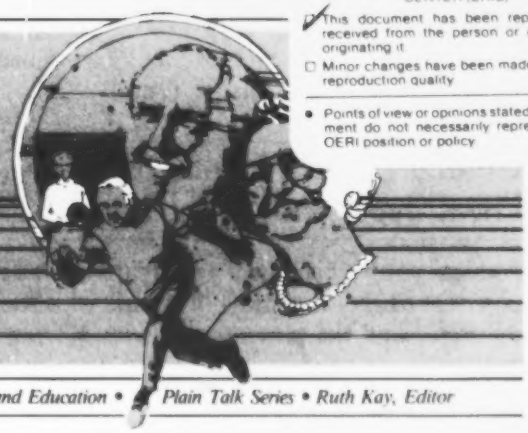
plain talk about...

Aging



NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH • Division of Communications and Education • Plain Talk Series • Ruth Kay, Editor

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Aging—the experience of growing old—is a state of mind as well as body. How well we do for our age concerns each of us throughout the course of our lives, but especially in later years.

Life expectancy today for more than 80 percent of the American population is beyond the age of 70. About 11 percent of the total population is over age 65; over the next 50 years that will increase to between 12 and 18 percent. The shifting population patterns are changing the present emphasis on youth to a focus on the elderly, who are emerging as a powerful social, political, and economic force which cannot be isolated or ignored. The elderly bring to their old age the wisdom and experience of a lifetime. It's time to take a new look at old age and its benefits, needs, and challenges.

The stereotype image of old age is changing with the increasing variety of living patterns and lifestyles of today's elderly. The physical and mental indicators of aging are also varied and do not necessarily keep pace with chronological age. Major life events occur at different times for different people. For some, marriage and children come early. For others, they come later in life. Age 60 to 65 means retirement for many, but some pursue active work for much longer. The time in which you live affects attitudes, yours and those of others, toward old age. Being a 70-year-old in the 1980s is very different from the 1880s. Long life expectancy is a reality of the twentieth century for most Western societies.

The Challenge of Growing Older

As with other age groups, the elderly face changes which challenge their physical and mental well-being, including:

- Changing roles
- Changing family patterns, friendships, and other social networks
- Changing economic status
- Changing behaviors in mind and body
- Changing interests and opportunities

All of the changes taking place will not be positive, but you can deal with the later years and their new freedoms, experiences, and rewards, as well as their challenges, if you are prepared to meet them.

Changing Roles

As an older citizen, you will be learning new roles along with new freedoms. Retirement from work puts you in the new role of "retiree." A new freedom is not having to get up with the resounding alarm clock. Another is having the time to travel and visit places that recently were only names in the travel book or gazetteer. Investigate the day trips sponsored by local communities or organizations. Many are free, others not, but all offer a chance to go to new places and meet new people. Enjoy your new experiences.

Retirement offers opportunity to look for interesting activities that are self-fulfilling and at the same time worthwhile to the community. Perhaps you've not previously had the time to give to a volunteer organization and would like to be of service now. But the role of volunteer is new to you and you're not sure where to begin. A good place to start is with a telephone call to your local office of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program or your local or county office of human resources or services. The need for volunteers is increasing, and volunteer activities offer many choices for your helping hand, in time frames convenient to you and

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in areas where your expertise and experience, or just your willingness, can be useful.

Changing Family Patterns, Friendships, and Social Networks

Perhaps you've become a grandparent. Then you've experienced the happiness of a visit with the grandchildren—and the pleasure of giving them back to their parents at the end of a lively get-together. Grandparent or not, the sticky fingers, runny noses, and bundles of energy are no longer cause for constant anxiety. With space between you and the young, you are able to enjoy the growth of another generation. You can be their link to the past, make history come alive because you've lived it. Youngsters might be mystified about your having been young once and may even feel some disbelief, but they'll enjoy hearing what you have to say. Be sure to let them know that you're also interested in what they have to say. Times *are* different from when you were their age. The young people are part of today's exploding electronic age, with its videos, cassettes, and computers. Share the excitement with them, and you'll be a good audience for each other.

Keep other lines of communication open. You can do it easily with the telephone, not only to speak with family members, but also to keep in touch with friends, old and new. It is a convenient link to the community, doctor, church, synagogue, druggist, hairdresser, investment broker, and others. Use it to do your comparative shopping as a consumer—from the price of a train ticket to the cost of your prescriptions. Remember, though, that while the telephone is great, nothing beats personal contact. Communicate and be a vital part of your community.

You are a social being, and it is important for you to see and be with other people, sharing the pleasures and even the cares of others. Now, more than ever, you need to expand your social networks. Use your initiative to seek out social programs and group activities available in your community. They can be the answer to your need for doing things with other people. In some communities, free bus transportation may be available and equipped to accommodate your cane or even your wheelchair. Do you know what your community offers? Now is the time to find out.

For information on activities and services for the elderly, call your local agency on aging, social services office, community mental health center, consumer affairs office, religious organizations, the Red Cross—or friends. National organizations include:

- National Council of Senior Citizens
  925 15th Street, N.W.
  Washington, DC 20005
- American Association of Retired Persons
  1909 "K" Street, N.W.
  Washington, DC 20049
- Gray Panthers
  3700 Chestnut Street
  Philadelphia, PA 19104

Changing Economic Status

Some people retire with a pension, or perhaps even retire from one career and go on to another with benefit of additional income. These are the "young-old" adults who are physically and mentally vigorous. If you are in this group, it may be the first time you are free of financial stress and able to indulge in "the good things in life" which were formerly out of reach. A sense of comfort and achievement comes with the new lifestyle and status.

No matter what your level of income, however, you're not alone if you're worried about getting your money's worth when the value of the dollar is low. If you have limited income or resources, it becomes an even greater concern. Are you troubled about the expense of going places and doing things? Convenience to transportation and shopping, for instance, is an important consideration in selecting a place to live. Senior housing at affordable rental rates may be the answer to your problem of finding the right apartment, at the right price, in the right place. When you are "stepping out," take advantage of the discounts offered to older citizens on the bus or other public transportation, at the theater, movies, museums, and restaurants. These are benefits which can help you to enjoy more for less.

Changing Behaviors in Mind and Body

Do you remember how careful you were about regular physical checkups, dental care, and eye care for the children? Well, now you have more time to look out for your own health. Investigate the benefits of health care available to you under Medicaid (for low-income persons) and Medicare (for

everyone 65 and over). See your doctor about your medical needs and take your list of questions with you. Be sure your doctor knows about all the medications you are taking and in what amounts. Don't be a victim of "drug abuse" from overdose. The doctor will also let you know when and how often you should have a complete physical examination. Be sure to let the doctor know about the little things that are bothering you, from feet that hurt while walking (and even while sitting) to eyes that won't let you thread a needle. If the sound on TV isn't loud enough for you, but nobody else seems to notice, it may be time to see your doctor about a hearing test. Your doctor can help you with your special problems, or refer you to a specialist who can, but it's up to you to seek needed medical advice.

Take the time, make the time, to follow your doctor's recommendations for a good fitness program for better physical and mental health. Exercise is important. Not only is it essential for your physical well-being, but it's good for your emotional health. Exercise does not have to be formal or organized. It can include those physical activities which may be a part of your daily living, such as housework, gardening, or even climbing stairs. Bend and stretch to keep the blood circulating and the muscles limber.

Ready for something more structured but not sure where to begin? Try walking. Do it alone, with your spouse, a friend, a grandchild, or even the dog—but do it. There's also jogging, swimming, bowling, tennis, or golf. Look into community programs for these and other physical fitness activities at schools, community centers, or the local "Y". Some are without charge for older adults. An increasing number of private or commercial gyms (health clubs or spas) are appearing in places such as shopping centers. They offer a variety of programs and facilities at a variety of costs. Check with your doctor before you start a new fitness activity or program. Together you can find one that is right for you—and for your pocketbook. Then, make it a habit to do some physical exercise regularly.

A good fitness plan includes good nutrition. You may need fewer calories as you get older, but you still need your vitamins and minerals. The best way to get them is in a well-balanced diet. Sometimes people who live alone dislike cooking for themselves; they snack on empty calories or forget to eat. If you are alone, perhaps you should take advantage of a "Meals-on-Wheels"

program available in your neighborhood. Some communities offer senior citizen lunch programs, including, in some areas, kosher meals. Check your local paper for ones in your community. Many newspapers print the week's menu along with the locations where the programs are offered. Or you may want to look into the possibility of moving into a senior citizen apartment where residents have one or two group meals daily. This takes care of two needs—social contacts and good nutrition. Don't treat the matter lightly. Remember how concerned you used to be about making certain the kids got their "basics"? Now it's time for you to make certain you get yours.

Not to be overlooked are the changing sexual lives of the elderly. Here again, another freedom for the older couple—sex without fear of pregnancy means it can be relaxed and enjoyed. While not all older partners still find pleasure in sexual intercourse, age knows no bounds for enjoying the pleasure of "touching" that comes with warm, close contacts. An interesting observation of the surviving population of older women is that they experience healthier emotional well-being when they have access to intimate, affectionate relationships.

Changing Interests and Opportunities

Have you caught up on your reading? What about those best-sellers you wanted to indulge in but didn't have time for? Your local library is a good place to find all kinds of reading material—and pleasant surroundings in which to enjoy it. It's a great place to broaden your horizons. Add to your knowledge while enjoying your leisure, not only with reading, but through other library-sponsored activities including lectures and movies.

A thirst for knowledge is not limited by age. Witness the trend in a shift of the college-age population from youngster to oldster. Adults make good students, and most colleges welcome them. Adult programs also give financial support to colleges facing decreasing enrollments of younger students. Did you miss out on a college education in your younger years? Are there courses you couldn't fit into your college curriculum but would like to take now? Many universities and colleges, including community colleges, offer a wide variety of courses, from undergraduate to advanced, for credit and non-credit, part-time or full-time. School could be the fulfillment you're looking for. Elder adult students think of themselves as older—and growing!

Other Aspects

Life happenings such as birth and death, divorce and remarriage have significant effect at any age. They affect the elderly more critically, especially those whose age is mid-70 and beyond. Events such as the death of a spouse, the loss of friends, or changes in environment are harder to take in these later years. The threat of reduced income, loneliness, isolation, dependency, or immobility often results in depression. Sometimes the symptoms are similar to the onset of organic brain disease (senility) and are incorrectly diagnosed as such.

Incorrect dosage of medication or inadequate nutrition might also produce false symptoms of organic brain disease (senility) or other mental or physical health disorders. Careful diagnosis is important to the proper care and treatment of the problems of the elderly. Old age in itself is not disabling, but diseases which occur in old age often are. Medical researchers are working on the answers to these problems to improve the quality of life in old age.

Positive Planning

Growing old successfully calls for careful planning. A realistic understanding of the changes and challenges of aging means being prepared to deal with them. It's never too soon to ask yourself the following questions:

- What living arrangements and lifestyle will offer me the best in comfort, convenience, independence, and companionship at a price I can afford?
- What work and recreational activities should I pursue to keep me physically and mentally fit?
- What organizations provide services for the aging that I should know about?
- What medical/health services and benefits, including Medicare/Medicaid, will be available to me?
- What will my retirement income be, together with retirement benefits such as Social Security?

No less in old age than in other stages, change and challenge are all a part of life. Plan for it—positively.

Written by Ruth Kay in consultation with NIMH Scientists.

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